1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

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The Setting

The Land and the People

FOR AT LEAST a thousand years the drama of empires rising, falling, expanding, and shrinking has been played out in an immense area of Africa at the southern edge of the Sahara known as the Sudan. These states, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, the Hausa kingdoms, Kanem-Bornu, Baghirmi, Wadai, Darfur, and others like them, from the upper Senegal River basin to the upper Nile, form a band from east to west across Africa. Their histories provide some of the most resplendent grandeur of Africa's past. Many of these states have now been consigned to the history books; Ghana and Mali have disappeared although modern countries have resuscitated their names; Songhai was destroyed by the Moroccans at the end of the sixteenth century; the Hausa states were altered as they came under the hegemony of the Fulani Empire of Sokoto at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and little is known as yet about the early states to the east of Lake Chad. On the other hand, Bornu in the northeastern corner of Nigeria has continued its sovereignty in the Chad Basin throughout a millennium of tribulations and triumphs and it goes on today organized as a separate emirate within Bornu Province.

Like most of the Sudan, Bornu is open savannah country, generally quite flat except for a few stable dunes covered with scrub in the north and several long low ridges running northwest to southeast in the southern part of the country. The ridges are probably ancient lake-shores of a great inland sea whose contemporary remnant is Lake Chad—a large shallow fresh water lake into which flow a number of rivers from the south and west. The soil is sandy and covered with scrub bush grass, and scattered trees, mostly thorny ones, except for the large spreading boabab, which dots the horizon here and there. In the 1930s the Nim, a hardy shade tree from India that thrives on the semi-desert conditions of northern Nigeria, was introduced to provide some forest preserves and year round shade in the villages. Here and there, especially at the bottom of the ridges, are large flat surfaces of hard clay that turn into gray-black mud during the rainy season. These provide clay for building materials and pottery, as well as water holes for the cattle of local villages and wandering nomads.

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The rainfall ranges from twenty-two to twenty-seven inches, in normal years, and is heavier as one moves from north to south. The important point that must be kept sight of is the fact that ninety percent of the rain falls in June, July, August, and September, while the months from October through June are almost totally dry. Indeed even within the four-month rainy season, about eighteen inches of the annual rainfall comes during July and August, so that in exceptionally dry years, June and September can easily turn out to be rainless months.

The various seasons are tied closely to the basic facts of rainfall and latitude. As the rain begins in June the dry sandy soil suddenly comes to life with large stretches of new grass and new leaves on the died-up thorn bushes. From atop one of the Bornu ridges, or from the roof of a house, the entire landscape, as far as the eye can see, starts to change color from yellow-brown to a soft green. The weather cools delightfully, the rains become more frequent, and the short daily storms freshen the air. The people call this period "the rain," and consider it by far the most pleasant time of the year, even though there is extra work for everybody because this is the planting and hoeing season, and there is as well the extra unpleasantness of increased numbers and endless varieties of insects that thrive at this time. After the rains in the months of October and November, and often into mid-December the proximity to the equator produces a short, hot season with clear, still days. In a sense this is autumn. The green of summer fades and the bushland changes to light browns, yellows and grays, except for the ripening millet in the fields, and the evergreen Nim tree. Towards the end of this season the weather cools, and a daily wind from the north to northeast blows in from the Sahara. This is the famous Harmattan that even coats shoreward sides of ships with red dust 100 miles off the coast of West Africa. It starts up about eight o'clock in the morning, to wane by about four in the afternoon, making for relatively cool, still mornings and evenings, with rather harsh, sandy winds, for most of the day, so that one wants to cover face and eyes when riding on horseback, especially into the wind. The people have a special word for this time of year which translates as "winter" but which also means "harvest," since the main crops—millet, guinea corn, and ground-nuts—are harvested towards the end of autumn and beginning of winter. By the end of February or beginning of March the coolness of winter has gone. The Harmattan wind still blows but it gets hotter every day and the nights, although windless and a trifle cooler than the days, begin to approach the daytime temperature. Indeed it is not uncommon for the temperature to remain about 100° F for several weeks on end, so that when a break finally comes, ninety degrees seems like an exuberantly pleasant relief. This is the hot season, called "the heat" locally, and considered by all to be the most unpleasant time of year, which gives even greater sweetness to the cooling rains when they finally arrive in June.

There are, then, in all, four seasons: the rains from June to September; a short, hot season in October and November; a cooler, windy winter from December to February; and a sharply hot dry period from March to June. Another way of looking at the seasons, also used by the people, and one which will be utilized to some extent in this book, is to simply speak of a dry season, from September to June, and a wet season from mid-June to mid-September. Obviously the contrast between the various seasons of the dry months is not nearly so great as between the rainy months and the rest of the year.

133 south of Lake Chad, into the Cameroons. Here the fingertips of the great Cameroon highland range, steep and impenetrable, extend into the flatlands.

2. The Nature of the Land.

The sweep of the horizon, as one travels in Bornu proper, is unbroken by hills. But as one goes north from Maiduguri toward Geidam, the land perceptibly rises and falls, and in the neighborhood of the town of Geidam these rises become steep. On close examination one notices that the rises are really no more than dunes, their inner consistency concealed by the cov- 137 ering vegetation. The natural vegetative cover here is sparse, limited largely to a profusion of low shrubs and bushes, most of them thorny. Much of the year the grass is brown and parched. [134] However the sandy soil is fertile. Immediately following the beginning of the rains, early in May, the new shoots begin to grow and soon the thick, coarse grass covers everything. Like the low bushes, the grass brings its harvest of burrs and thistles. In heavily watered places one may see copses of trees, but by far the most impressive tree characteristic of the area is the baobab or kuka (Adansonia digitata). Baobabs are relatively tall, but their huge thickness of trunk gives them a distorted appearance which is heightened by gnarled, twisted, stunted limbs. They grow in solitary splendor, and are used as land marks because of their prominence against the flat line of the horizon. Again, traveling north toward Geidam, one notices that the water

137 courses are marked increasingly by dum palm trees (Cucifera Thebaica), and this heightens the impression that the border of the great Sahara desert lies not far away.

133 Because of the flatness of the land, rain water does not drain readily into streams and rivers. Low areas become marshes, roads become quagmires, and towns are completely cut off. The Yobe, a slow, meandering river, flows throughout the year though it may dwindle to a width of twenty-five feet in the dry season. At some time in July its flood reaches Geidam and it then swells to a width of half a mile.

3. Rainfall and Temperature.

132 The agricultural productivity of the region is determined completely by the amount of rainfall. The rainy season begins in early May and lasts until October. Sporadic rains mark its beginning. During its height it may rain every other day, usually at evening time for half an hour to an hour.. The storm clouds can be seen gathering in the east in the late afternoon. A strong warning wind precedes the rain, which descends in sheets. At times during the rainy season, from a slight rise of ground, one can see several distinct storms on the horizon, the distant columns of mist falling from their individual clouds. During this time of the year the temperature is moderate and pleasant.

The rains steadily decrease in frequency and come to a halt in October. A brief hot season follows, lasting until December when the cold sets in. For several months the temperature drops

161 has been declining in the present century. The Kanuri Empire
[175] had suffered final defeat at the hands of Rabeh's invading forces in 1890, and the countryside had been ravaged in the
[164] succeeding decade. Venereal disease appears to have spread
[842] widely throughout the population leaving in its wake a marked decline in fertility and a resultant decrease in numbers of
311 the Kanuri population. There is consequently little pressure
[137] for land to farm. Large stretches of brush country are unworked, and the denser sections, along old water-courses, are
136 veritable jungles of brush and thorn. Larger wild-life have long since disappeared from Bornu, forced out by many centuries of human occupation, but some of the denser section of thicket might well support them today. A small herd of elephants is reported around Gumsa, in Geidam District, and of course elephants can be found in the extensive marshes along Lake Chad, but by and large the only game one sees are gazelle, monkeys, and birds, including occasional ostriches.

361 The Kanuri are a sedentary, agricultural people, who live in villages and towns. The fields which they farm encircle their villages. They are never found living in dispersed home-
369 steads. A basic division exists between Kanuri village life and Kanuri life in the towns and cities. This division corresponds to the classic distinctions between folk and urban polar extremes. Urban life was present in pre-contact Kanuri culture
[162] and consequently is well integrated into Kanuri culture. In fact, the Kanuri cities of the eighteenth century were unques-

Lastly gum arabic, which is the base from which gum drops
137 are made, is collected from the kolkol tree (Acacia arabica).
222 The trees grow wild, and are fairly common in the area of Geidam. The villagers collect the solidified resin and sell the
[434] gum arabic to the companies. This is a secondary source of cash, and the distribution of the trees is fairly limited.

[262] Some species of plants are gathered for food. The leaves of the kuka tree are the most important, and are commonly used
224 in food preparation. Hunting is of minor importance. Full-time hunters are almost never found. In the larger villages and towns organized hunts are carried out by the young men. In such cases the game, typically gazelle and guinea fowl, are
226 surrounded and brought down by thrown sticks. Fishing is carried out in the rivers and in Lake Chad. Fish are caught by a variety of means--they are trapped in large woven traps, netted, and hooked, and in Lake Chad larger species are harpooned.
[262] Fish are an important food source for communities on the shores
[184] of rivers and lakes, but are not generally important for the Kanuri as a whole.

438 Trade always has played an important part in the Kanuri
443 economy, and this would naturally follow in a society where
[433] rural-urban distinctions are centuries old. The kasugu, or
[369] market, is a central part of every Kanuri town. The Kanuri
[366] market is primarily and almost exclusively a local market, where village farmers can sell agricultural produce and buy the products made by artisans of the town. In addition, limited regional exchange is effected through the market. External

GEIDAM

121 individual character, to an entire culture, many times the size of his single community.

The present study is, then, a community study, as must [101] usually be the case in the study of complex societies. The community is the town of Geidam, where the author and his wife lived for one year, from the ending of the rains in 1956 until the rains ceased once again in 1957.

A. The geography and ecology of Geidam.

162 632 Geidam, with its population of 11,032 is one of the largest towns in Bornu Province (see Table I) and represents urban Kanuri 563 culture. The people of the countryside between Geidam and 197 Nguru, some 110 miles to the west, are predominantly Manga, a Kanuri sub-group speaking a Kanuri dialect which differs slightly from Kanuri proper. To the east, towards Damasak, are Mobber, 101 197 another sub-group. In the town of Geidam, however, the towns- [369] folk are Kanuri, and speak standard Kanuri. This is primarily because urban Kanuri in Geidam have more in common with urban Kanuri coming from other large towns and cities, and share more with them than they do with the farming peoples of the small villages surrounding Geidam.

131 Geographically, Geidam lies in the northernmost part of the province, in fact, the northernmost part of Nigeria, since the border separating Nigeria from the independent country of 133 Niger is only twenty miles north. The land is a flat sandy [137] plain with scrub vegetation which becomes increasingly more

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133 desert-like as one moves north from Geidam. The population to
• [137] the north of Geidam continues to be Kanuri (or Manga), but its
[162] density declines rapidly as one moves directly north. Geidam lies on the Yobe River, usually referred to as the Komadugu Yobe River, a redundancy since komadugu means river in the Kanuri language. The Yobe is a slowly moving stream that empties into Lake Chad, approximately 100 miles east of Geidam. Many streams and rivers of the north flow for some months after the rains and then dry up completely. The Yobe, however, is large enough to continue to flow the year round. Before the rains it is reduced to a stream thirty or forty feet in width; after the rains the river reaches its flood crest, when it may extend over half a
[505] mile in width. Though one could travel from Geidam to Lake Chad on the Yobe River, the Kanuri do not use the river for travel or
[172] for commerce. Along the Yobe river, some twenty miles east of Geidam, lie the ruins of Birni Ngazargamo, the ancient capital of the Mais which was sacked by the Fulani. Hence Geidam is not
[36] far from the old center of empire. Along the river, and still further on, along the shores of Lake Chad, are numerous villages and towns.

131 The geographic location of Geidam, aside from the drier
[134] sandy nature of the land because of its northern location, is significant because of its situation in relation to Maiduguri,
131 the provincial capital, and to Nguru, the rail-head. Maiduguri,
633 in the center of the province (see Figure 2), is important both
491 because it is the administrative and commercial capital and be-